Fighting for Life

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Dec. 19 — At Kennedy Center last night, in the revival of the Rodgers and Hart musical, "On Your Toes," the Russian ballerina Natalia Makarova was about to begin the ballet "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue."

In the musical's plot, the jealous villain had vowed to harm a male dancer in the ballet. As if on cue, a ripping sound was heard as a large chunk of scenery came crashing down on stage, and a length of pipe slammed into the fragile-looking ballerina.

She cried out and kept on sobbing. The curtain was lowered. The stunned audience realized that the accident was not part of the show; after waiting vainly for word of her condition, the audience somberly filed out.

Remembering that I worked for a newspaper, I went backstage to file a report: Miss Makarova, who defected to the West a dozen years ago, was being lifted into an ambulance; an attendant said she had received head lacerations and a fractured shoulder. Today her condition is reported to be fair. She was lucky; a few inches the other way and the falling pipe might have killed or crippled her. Perhaps her white wig provided some protection.

An incident like that snatches thoughts away from the entertainments of politics and directs them to the very thin line between life and death.

Since this took place in Washington, the talk in the opera house lobby drifted to the way that the unexpected — an accident, or a shooting — can scramble the patterns of political life. Miss Makarova's friend, Ann Getty, drew the parallel of the danger of an accident in a world of many nations armed with nuclear weapons. Nothing so underscores the value of life than the sudden realization of its fragility.

It started me thinking about Barney Clark, the man with the first artificial heart. He knew he was about to die; he gambled on an untested machine, which later broke down and required another operation to repair; he cannot know what chance he has of pulling through.

An editorial in The New York Times, after praising Dr. Clark's courage and wishing him well, raised a troubling issue: "Can all that pain and exertion be worthwhile? The purpose of medicine is to improve life's quality, not to make Methuselahs of us all. . . . Dr. Clark made his own choice, but many would decide death is preferable to being permanently tethered to a bulky machine, without hope of release."

I'm glad that editorialist is not my doctor. The purpose of medicine is not only to improve life's quality but to save lives. If, in the process of averting death, a patient chooses to become a human guinea pig or to marry a bulky machine, the patient has the right to demand that the medical profession let him make that choice.

Yet the editorial is accurate in saying "many would decide death is preferable." That is because too many people treat life as a possession that becomes dispensable when it becomes too onerous. Suicide, as one hospital administrator said in dead seriousness, has become a viable option.

This is wholly aside from the issue of keeping a long-comatose person on life-support systems or of berating those who elect not to prolong unbearable pain. Dr. Clark's case shows that criticism is growing of those who fight for life, who refuse to go gently into that good night, and who annoy the healthy with their quest for new drugs or undignified procedures. Wanting to live — against all odds — is derogated as Methuselism.

The play "Who's Life Is It Anyway?" made a hero out of the patient who demanded his right to die. The curious new fashion is to praise those who are willing to go quietly, hailing as courageous those who smile sadly and don't make a fuss. At the same time, patients who refuse to resign themselves to the seemingly inevitable are viewed as pushy, and doctors willing to go to the frontiers of medicine are derogated as aggressive.

Fortunately, we Methuselists have real-life dramas. Barney Clark is not prolonging his life because he is courageous, he is prolonging it because he does not want to die. In this display of the God-given instinct for self-preservation, Dr. Clark voluntarily advances the technology of artificial organs. In a few years, other "hopeless" patients with other ailments will press researchers into the practice of brain transplants.

Is it ethical to fight so hard to live? An orthodox rabbi in Jerusalem is reported as saying that a man with an artificial heart has no right to call himself a human being; I wonder if a clergyman so heartless has the right to call himself a rabbi.

The fierce determination to live can affect health and astound physicians, causing seeming miracles; it would be immoral to deny available technology to the Barney Clarks of the world who are carrying the fight for life to new heights.

In all the new emphasis on the quality of life, a ballerina's brush with death is a vivid reminder that life itself has a quality not to be scorned.